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ABSTRACT

No matter what their role, knowing how to identify, select, and evaluate information resources are important processes for adult educators. Two of the main sources of information related to adult education are information databases and clearinghouses or resource centers. Two comprehensive references that can be used to select the most appropriate database are the "Encyclopedia of Information Systems and Services, 10th Edition" (1990) and "Datapro Directory of On-Line Services" (1990). The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database is considered to be the primary source for adult education due both to its purpose and its history of service to the field. National and state-level clearinghouses and resource centers disseminate information about adult education to a variety of audiences. "The Directory of National Clearinghouses: Resource Centers and Clearinghouses Serving Adult Educators and Learners" (1990) provides information about national clearinghouses and resource centers. Two common strategies used to identify information resources are asking other people and searching information databases. Most information databases can be accessed both manually and by computer, and many are available in CD-ROM format. Guidelines to evaluate and select resources based on their content include authority of source, timeliness, relevance, depth, accuracy, and replicability. (Seven references are listed.) (YLB)

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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LOCATING AND SELECTING INFORMATION: A GUIDE FOR ADULT EDUCATORS

The term **information society** has become a cliche but the fact of the matter is we are living in an age in which we are bombarded with information. In his book **Information Anxiety**, Richard Wurman (1989) accurately describes how many of us feel when surrounded with vast amounts of data that do not provide the required knowledge. According to Wurman, the following situations are likely to produce information anxiety: not understanding information, feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information to be understood, not knowing if certain information exists, not knowing where to find information, and knowing exactly where to find information but not having the key to access it (ibid., p. 44).

No matter what their role, knowing how to identify, select, and evaluate information resources are important processes for adult educators. They need to be aware of a wide range of possible resources. In addition, they must be able to sift through and evaluate their relevance. This **ERIC Digest** describes where adult educators can find information resources and suggests strategies for accessing information. It ends with some guidelines for selecting the most appropriate information.

Information Sources for Adult Educators

Two of the main sources of information related to adult education are information databases and clearinghouses or resource centers. Libraries--particularly college and university libraries located at institutions with graduate programs in adult and continuing education--are also sources of adult education information, but they will not be discussed here. Individuals can inquire at their local libraries about the availability of specific resources, for example, online databases or books.

Information Databases

Information databases store collections of related information that can be retrieved via computer using information retrieval software. When stored, the materials have usually been indexed or classified using a vocabulary control device, i.e., a thesaurus, a list of subject headings, or a specialized classification scheme, to facilitate their retrieval. This controlled vocabulary is used to retrieve information from a database (Niemi and Imel 1987).

A large number of existing databases contain information useful to adult educators. Two comprehensive references that can be used in selecting the most appropriate database are the ***Encyclopedia of Information Systems and Services, 10th Edition*** (1990) and ***Datapro Directory of On-Line Services*** (1990). Both provide information about a variety of online databases and are available at many libraries.

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database is considered to be the primary source for adult education due both to its purpose and its history of service to the field. ERIC has been collecting and classifying all types of educational materials since 1966. Its focus is on fugitive materials (those that are not otherwise readily available) such as pamphlets, conference proceedings and papers, curriculum materials, research studies, and reports of government-funded projects. More than 700 education-related journals, including all major adult education journals published both in the United States and abroad, are scanned regularly to select articles for inclusion in the database (Imel 1989; Niemi and Imel 1987). Over 14,000 items indexed with the term **adult education** have been included in the ERIC database since 1966.

The availability of microcomputers and the packaging of the ERIC database in CD-ROM (compact disk-read only memory) format make ERIC more accessible to the general public. Many individuals are choosing to search ERIC without the assistance of a professional searcher using microcomputers or CD-ROM equipment. A subject search of ERIC results in bibliographic information plus an abstract of all information in the ERIC database on the topic (Imel 1989).

Clearinghouses and Resource Centers

Several clearinghouses and resource centers disseminate information about adult education to a variety of audiences including administrators, teachers, researchers, students, and the general public. Some of these organizations, such as the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (ERIC/ACVE) are national in scope. Others, such as AdvancE (Pennsylvania's adult education resource center and clearinghouse), are state-level organizations. Some of the functions provided by clearinghouses and resource centers include searches of information databases, information about resources, collections of materials, and referral to other agencies and organizations serving adult learners. Many also develop and make available newsletters and free and inexpensive materials related to adult education resources. ***The Directory of National Clearinghouses: Resource Centers and Clearinghouses Serving Adult Educators and Learners*** (1990) provides information about national clearinghouses and resource centers.

Strategies for Accessing Resources

Knowing where resources are located is one piece of the information puzzle, but this knowledge is best used in combination with some strategies to begin helping you access the most appropriate resources. Such questions as How much information do you need?, How much do you already know about the topic?, How much time and money do you have to devote to this task?, and How do you plan to use the information? can assist in selecting the best strategy to begin your information search.

Two common strategies used to identify information resources include asking other people and searching information databases. Sometimes the best place to begin a search is by getting

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in touch with someone who is familiar with the area. This strategy may be particularly useful if you know little or nothing about the topic. Most adult educators are more than happy to share information about their work, including key information sources. Adult education resource center and clearinghouse personnel are frequently able to help you identify information sources. These individuals work with adult education information resources on a daily basis and are knowledgeable about new materials. They may be able to refer you to other sources of information as well.

A second strategy for locating information is by searching information databases. Most information databases can be accessed both manually and by computer, and many are available in CD-ROM format.

Manual searching. Manual searching refers to the process of using print indexes or catalogs to identify resources. Although not as efficient as computer searching, it may be more effective, especially if you only need a small amount of material or if you are unfamiliar with the topic. A manual search permits the luxury of browsing that the cost of computer searching prohibits. The tradeoff, however, is the cost of the time devoted to the task. Another drawback to manual searching is the fact that you can only search under one subject heading at a time.

Computer searching. Computer searching can be both efficient and effective, provided you know what you are looking for. Computer searching is the most efficient means of retrieving a large amount of information on a topic because it allows you to combine two or more subjects. It can also permit you to limit your search to certain types of material such as research, project descriptions, and curricula. If you have not sufficiently focused your topic, however, it can result in irrelevant material. If you are unfamiliar with the database you wish to search, it is best to consult a professional searcher before attempting a search.

CD-ROM searching. Searching using CD-ROM combines many of the best features of both manual and computer searching. Because there are no online charges being incurred, it can provide the luxury of browsing at the same time it provides the efficiency of computer searching. Because of the time needed to print out citations, CD-ROM is not the best medium for large searches. Also, the demands placed on many CD-ROM stations available to the public may mean limited access.

Selecting Information Sources

Selecting potential sources of information once they have been identified is another step in process. How selective you wish to be may depend on a number of factors such as the amount of material uncovered in your search, the use to which you intend to put the information, and the availability of the sources.

Barrows (1987) suggests weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each source in terms of the following:

- **Availability.** Is the source obtainable?
- **Accessibility.** How easy is it to acquire the source?
- **Time.** How long will it take to get it?
- **Effort.** How much trouble will it be to get it?
- **Cost.** How much will it cost?

Although important in terms of the feasibility of acquiring resources, these criteria have nothing to do with evaluating the substantive nature of the resource. The following guidelines can be used to evaluate and select resources based on their content:

- **Authority of source.** Is the author an established leader in the field? Is it published by an organization that is known for contributing to the field?
- **Timeliness.** Is the information current and up to date? Is it based on current references?
- **Relevance.** Does the source deal with the topic in a contemporary manner? Does the source contain the type of information you need?
- **Depth.** Is the topic treated in sufficient detail to be of use?
- **Accuracy.** Based on what you already know about the topic, is the information correct and reliable?
- **Replicability.** If you are planning to use the material for the purpose of replication, does the source contain information that can be used in other settings?

These criteria should be considered guidelines, not hard and fast rules, when selecting sources. Depending on how you will be using the information, some may be more important than others. For example, if a source meets all the other criteria, the fact that you are unfamiliar with the author or the producer may be irrelevant.

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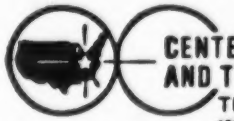

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